In their famous study of media systems in Western democracies\(^1\), Hallin and Mancini wanted to show how the media are not simply reflections of the social and political structure, but at the same time they have an impact on society through a mechanism of mutual dependency. This approach is useful to understanding the route taken by media systems of Eastern European countries since the end of the communist regimes in the late Eighties and early Nineties of the last century. Albeit in a bloc marked by dictatorships based on the same economic and political models, national specificities and filters have emerged just in media sector, confirming the centrality of historical and socio-cultural contexts within which media operate, as many authors said\(^2\).

In this article, I try to catch the peculiarities which helped to direct the changes of the media system during the transition to democracy in two countries of the former communist bloc as Albania and Poland; the aim is not to capture the current state of their media systems, but rather to highlight the origins of the process of liberalization and commercialization of the sector, with reference to the first decade of transition to democracy. These countries could be paradigmatic of the variety of media transformation in that area of Europe and they could offer a valid range of dynamics developed since 1989. First of all, it is necessary to observe the state of media system in the whole area during the regime, in order to identify the main differences among the single countries.

1. MEDIA SYSTEMS IN EASTERN EUROPE BEFORE 1989. AN OVERVIEW

With the fall of Berlin Wall and the end of communist regimes, some Central Eastern European countries got through deep changes in institutional, economic, cultural and even in media system.

The defeat of dictatorship and the beginning of the transition towards democracy occurred in different ways and intensities from one country to another, revealing the existence of heterogeneous situations within the same economic and political bloc. As pointed by Timothy Garton Ash\(^3\), democratization came true in ten years in Poland, ten months in Hungary, ten weeks in East Germany, ten days in Czechoslovakia and ten

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hours in Romania; this remark highlights the acceleration of democratization processes which propagated in neighboring states, with a key role played by demonstrative effects of cross-border television⁴.

In fact, the function of mass media in promoting knowledge of current events in nearest countries and encouraging emulation helps to understand that by the Eighties, the “picture of a co-ordinated, univocal and propagandistic media was no longer adequate for the vast majority of communist societies”⁵.

According to Sparks and Reading, more closely, we can identify at least three areas in which media systems of Soviet countries moved away from the stereotype of the media in totalitarian regimes:

– import of television and radio programs;
– presence of partly commercial broadcasters;
– openness to foreign frequencies and signals.

In Poland, for example, import of media products grew since Seventies and in 1986 about 43% of films and 47% of the series aired on Polish TV came from Western countries⁶; furthermore, since 1987 a significant decrease of propaganda occurred in information contents⁷. The case of Hungary was even more emblematic from the point of view of the attempts of liberalization in media sector implemented by some communist countries: in 1986, Hungarian State television had acquired more than 800 programs from abroad, mostly from Western countries⁸, so that, in a few months, the percentage of those watching foreign TV programs increased from 19% to 31%⁹.

While Poland and Hungary experienced opening of the media system, other countries of the Soviet bloc lived opposite conditions. Czechoslovakia, for instance, underwent the so-called “normalization” also in the media sector: in fact, the third channel of State television “was dedicated entirely to rebroadcasting programmes from Russian TV”¹⁰ and the import of foreign media products was 50% from Eastern European countries and 50% from other countries¹¹. In Romania, the repression was even more violent, so that after 1985 State television nearly ceased its programming with only two hours a day¹². Similarly, in Albania led by Hoxha there was just one television channel broadcasting only from 17.30 to 20¹³.

This brief overview shows how different the state of media in the countries of Soviet bloc was; the deep discrepancy between partial liberalization and strict compliance with the principles of totalitarianism influenced the ways to overthrow the regime, the transition to democracy and the subsequent structure of media systems.

⁷ Sparks, Reading, Communism, capitalism and the mass media.
⁹ Sparks, Reading, Communism, capitalism and the mass media.
¹⁰ The term “normalization” refers to a phase of tightening of the regime following the attempts of reform during the so-called “Prague Spring” of 1968.
¹¹ Sparks, Reading, Communism, capitalism and the mass media, 57.
¹² Ibid.
2. MEDIA IN TRANSITION

To fully understand the transition process in Eastern Europe, we can use the words of Jakubowicz\textsuperscript{15} who considers it complete when three conditions occur: path to democracy has been accomplished at a systemic level (the end of State monopoly and the rise of the market economy), institutional (a new form of government) and international one (the entry of some post-communist countries in the European Union). However, as stated, this path has been developed in different ways. More precisely, we can identify two separate groups: on the one hand, the three large countries of Central Europe (Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary), Slovenia and Baltic countries, and on the other hand the republics of the former USSR and the whole area of the Balkans. The countries of the first group have experienced in a short time democratic institutions and market economies, while in those of the second group the transition process has often been slowed down and hindered by conflicts or relapses in authoritarianism marked by nationalism and personalism\textsuperscript{16}. The geographical unevenness of the democratization process represents “the historical paradox of post-communism”\textsuperscript{17} which is also evident in the media sector: in fact, as socialism was realized differently from country to country, so “the media in Eastern Europe are a clear example of how past institutional configurations influenced the process of media transition”\textsuperscript{18}. Nevertheless, most countries saw a proliferation of media also favored by a renewed climate of freedom which, however, had not a few negative consequences on the overall quality of information and media productions: as Gritti pointed out, in fact,

since the early 90s the media, and particularly television, play a crucial role in political struggle and communication, given the fragility of the new political parties and the opacity of economic interests. Thus is fulfilled that particular convergence of media, political class and new capitalist. Media logic pervades in full the various political systems becoming the centerpiece\textsuperscript{19}.

This consideration shows that new democratic regimes and their media systems have struggled to overcome the legacy of communism and, in some cases, “mixed forms of old and new authoritarian structures as well as new commercial spheres evolved and are likely to co-exist for some time to come”\textsuperscript{20}. More cautiously, Gross observes that the emergence of new interests and social groups has indeed favored pluralism of information, but at the same time has given rise to the issue of autonomy of the media; in fact, the period of transition has been characterized in all countries by the approach of the media system and various association and organization forms. For this reason, a “complete media autonomy from societal institutions is impossible because at the micro level of the individual, each journalist, editor, or broadcaster also belongs to another institution, whether political, social, or civic and cultural”\textsuperscript{21}.

\textsuperscript{16} Gritti, \textit{Postcomunismo e media}, 68.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{19} Gritti, \textit{Postcomunismo e media}, 74.
Several authors22 tried to define common trends of media transition processes in Eastern Europe countries, coming to coin terms such as “italianization”, “germanization”, “gaullization” to emphasize the closeness with certain models of relationship between media and politics typical of Western democracies, particularly European.

A recent attempt to classify the structure of media system of Eastern Europe after 1989 has been put forward by Jakubowicz23 who identifies three main “orientations”:

– **idealistic**: this model has been yet experienced during Seventies and Eighties in countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, where social and cultural opposition movements grew up with the aim of building a “public sphere” for the access and participation to information and communication and preventing abuses by the political and economic power;

– **mimetic**: the model is based on the implementation of Western media models through the liberalization of the press and the consolidation of a “dual” television system, which leads to define Eastern Europe as an area subject to a “quasi-colonial dependency”24 of Western countries;

– **atavistic**: this model reflects the tendency of some new democratic governments to slow down the process of democratization of the media and their transformation to a real public service able to guarantee the pluralism of voices and orientations. Some cases of media systems controlled by just one political party occurred in Hungary in 1990-91 during the so-called “first war of media” and in Bulgaria in 1996.

According to the author, the dominant model currently in Eastern Europe “is a combination of the ‘mimetic’ and ‘atavistic’ media policy orientations”25 with a prevalence of the first in those countries that have experienced an approach to liberal democracy and setbacks to the second model in countries where new and dangerous authoritarianism occurred.

### 3. ALBANIA: TELEVISION IS EVERYWHERE

1. **Media freedom or free media?**

In this small Balkan country, the transition from dictatorship to democracy developed slowly and with difficulty, partly because of the isolation policy pursued by the regime during the previous decades; the break with the forces of Warsaw Pact in 1968 and the approaching to the Chinese totalitarian model turned Albania into one of the “most Stalinist and reactionary [countries] in Eastern Europe”26. This situation of backwardness was reflected on the start of the democratization process following the collapse of communist regime: the legalization of political opposition, for example, did not turn immediately into a political and cultural pluralism, as in the first elections of 1991 the Socialist Party, direct expression of the former leaders of the regime, gained 66% of the

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24 Jakubowicz, “Post-communist media development in perspective”, 11.

25 Jakubowicz, “Finding the right place on the map”, 113.

votes against 27% of the Democratic Party\textsuperscript{27}. Only in the elections of the following year, Albanian population elected the first non-communist president since World War II and political forces related to ethnic, religious and cultural minorities entered the Parliament.

Similarly, also the media system took the same path. With regard to the role of the press, it was marginal in addressing the transition process: Zeri i popullit (“Voice of the people”), the official newspaper of the propaganda during Hoxha regime, continued to be dependent on the single-party until its dissolution and, then, became the organ of the new Socialist Party\textsuperscript{28}. In those years several newspapers were born, such as Albania or Rilindja Demokratike, both close to the Democratic Party, and only in 1993 – four years after the fall of the communism – a law on the press was passed. However, subsequent laws did not improve the situation: Albania lived for a long period of democratization the paradox of a press freedom and pluralism of information formally defended and promoted by the laws, but not structured yet, due to a lack of social and cultural conditions. Substantially,

Albanian media has found itself in a situation when there is freedom of the press, but no free press. The activity of media business can hardly be called transparent, and there is little or no state control, combined with problems of implementation of existing media legislation\textsuperscript{29}.

More clearly, the broadcasting sector followed and reflected the slow process of reform of state institutions: until the mid-90s, in fact, both Radio Tirana (RT) and Television Shqiptare (TVSH) – the historical State radio and television transmitting during the regime – remained under the control of a single party and represented the only source of information of the population. Since 1995, the immobility of the system was undermined by an explosion of private television channels, often made by small publishers, broadcasting on a local basis. The majority of private radio stations and television channels transmitted in confined areas, sometimes small neighborhoods, in a progressive process of regionalization of media; this turned Albania into one of the countries with the highest density of television channels in the world\textsuperscript{30}. Tendency towards decentralization of the media produced a radio and television system which is based, precisely, on the circulation and the entrenchment of local TV stations with limited coverage at the expense of national broadcasters.

2. Regionalization of media system

Actually, in the Albanian television landscape only two private stations have a national vocation: TV Klan, which reaches 43% of the national territory, and TV Arberia, which covers 30%; on the contrary, there are 76 local analog televisions\textsuperscript{31}. The latters proliferated across the country and, despite having a license to transmit only at the local level, are able

\textsuperscript{27} Biagini A., Storia dell’Albania contemporanea, Milano: Bompiani, 2005, 148.
\textsuperscript{28} Gritti, Postcomunismo e media.
to reach larger areas; in fact, “some television stations with a regional license are catching up with the signal coverage of the private national stations, or even outdoing them”\(^{32}\).

The legislation of the sector revolves around the law “on public and private radio and television”\(^{33}\); this law “aim[ed] to regulate the activity of electronic media in detail, including the public broadcaster, and the analog commercial media, cable and satellite television”\(^{34}\), putting an end to a period of deregulation. The law established the birth of National Council of Radio and Television (NCRT) whose activities and responsibilities are set out in Article 7: among them, there are the monitoring of information programs of private national and local broadcasters, the assurance of real competition in the field of media, the determination of rules of operation and organization of public and private broadcasters. In addition, the cleavage national/local is well marked in several passages of the law; Article 20, for example, separates national and local licenses and, furthermore, provides that no person or entity may obtain local licenses for areas larger than 200,000 inhabitants.

Another key aspect of the law and subsequent amendments\(^{35}\) is the attempt to untie the activities of media from political power: among the changes introduced in Albanian television in recent years, we have to emphasize interventions on

the composition of the regulatory authorities. The structure, based on a formula of balanced political representation, was turned into one including civil society, academia and professionals. These moves were officially intended to reduce political influence on the regulator, but some of the regulator’s latest actions were seen as politically biased\(^{36}\). 

Table 1 - *Audience share of top ten television channels in Albania (2002)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broadcaster</th>
<th>Audience (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV Klan</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVSH</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Channel</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telenorba Shqiptare</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Arberia</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vizion +</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telesport</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Shhijak</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Teuta</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gjeli Vizion</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^{33}\) Law No. 8410 of September 30, 1998.

\(^{34}\) Londo, “Major trends of media development during post-communist transition”.


The lack of competition from public service broadcaster favoured the growth of commercial television stations in viewers’ choice, as shown in the table 1; however, even “the most popular TV channels are not safe yet from the economic viewpoint, a situation which shows that the Albanian TV market is still far from being stable and independent”37.

4. POLAND: A LONG TRANSITION

The democratization process which affected Poland has its roots in earlier decades, during which the Polish people expressed their impatience towards the communist regime. In this sense, there were two key episodes: the first in 1956, when a series of popular unrest in Poznan culminated in a general strike harshly repressed by the intervention of the Soviet army, and the second in 1970 with the explosion of riots among the workers of the shipyards of Gdansk, on the Baltic Sea. Both events highlighted the “congenital fragility of a communist party unable to find a compromise with the working class in the society”38. After the Gdansk strike, there was a worsening of repression and control of communist elites over every aspect of the life; this led to a reorganization of opposition movements culminated in the birth of Solidarnosc, an organization whose goal was to “affirm the autonomy of social bodies from the State-party [and] grow the participation of citizens in choices directly regarding them”39.

Ten years of battles and claims turned Solidarnosc into a relevant entity in Polish system thanks to the support of Catholic Church40 and Western democracies. The presence on political scene of an organization like Solidarnosc weakened the regime, allowing a smooth transition to democracy. In this sense, the change of political system came along two distinct phases; with the partially free elections in 198941 there was a sharp polarization between two divergent positions, that is the continuity of the communism or antagonism to it represented by Solidarnosc. Afterward, even with the elections of 1991, a phase marked by a growing fragmentation of the political system and the birth of a hundred political parties opened; Solidarnosc was divided into seven formations. Among the causes of this high fragmentation, there were both high social differentiation and generalized distrust of Polish citizens in politics: to such an extent in 1995, 65% of population declared they do not feel represented by any of more 270 existing parties42.

1. New democracy, new limitations

The fragmentation and pluralism of interests and voices reverberated even on the media sector; within three years from the end of the regime, at least 60 illegal broadcasters

37 Londo, “Major trends of media development during post-communist transition”.
39 Ibid., 126.
41 Poland is the only Eastern Europe country in which, thanks to the victory of 1989 elections by Solidarnosc, there was the paradox of a non-Communist government before the actual fall of the communist regime.
arose and, in little more than a decade, over 400 television channels reached across the country.\textsuperscript{43} Similarly, distrust in politics and the lack of active participation in public life influenced the development of media; during the years of transition to democracy, in fact, the proliferation of hundreds of private broadcasters has not touched, unlike what happened in other countries of the bloc, the supremacy of public service. This is due to both the traditional reluctance of the population to experiment new languages and forms of expression, both by regulatory restrictions imposed by various governments which have followed\textsuperscript{44}. A turning point in Polish television system is represented by Broadcasting Act of 1992, which set up the legal framework for the regulation of the newly introduced dual pluralistic model of media typical for Western countries, were both public and private media co-exist. As a result, privately owned and commercially financed stations were allowed into Poland, and TVP ceased to be a state-controlled broadcaster and was redefined as public service\textsuperscript{45}. The law imposed a series of constraints and limitations in terms of production and cultural freedom: Article 15, for instance, compelled broadcasters to appropriate 33\% of overall transmission for products in Polish\textsuperscript{46}, while advertising could not exceed 15\% of total programming (Article 16). Moreover, the Catholic Church had particular advantages by law, as specified in Article 18, which obliged operators to respect Christian values present in the Polish society; this prevented a full deployment of commercial broadcasters.

2. \textit{Between particularization and universalization}

Despite the liberalization and the birth of hundreds of channels, private television sector is dominated by two giants: Polsat, with national vocation, composed of seven channels, and TVN, which has trans-regional structure and is composed of five channels. Therefore, as stated, media system in Poland is “highly marketed and plural, but remain subordinated to elite groups rather than developing a public service orientation”\textsuperscript{47}. As Naumann pointed out\textsuperscript{48}, private television channels serve a delay of audience than the public service despite an offer mainly based on entertainment\textsuperscript{49}: in this sense, private sector suffers from some structural weakness, such as concentration in only two stations and the approval of the schedule around Western characteristics. During the Nineties, in fact, the import of foreign media products increasingly grew to such an extent that in 1998 Polish programs represented a very short percentage of the entire schedule both in public service and especially in private broadcasters; on TVP1, the first public channel, nearly three-quarters of fiction series came from United States, while this percentage

\textsuperscript{43} Soros Foundation (Open Society Institute Foundation), \textit{Television across Europe}.


\textsuperscript{45} Szostak S., “Poland’s return to Europe. Polish terrestrial broadcasters and TV fiction”, \textit{View: Journal of European Television History & Culture}, 1, 2 (2012): 79-93, cit. 80.

\textsuperscript{46} News, advertising, sports and teletext are not included.


\textsuperscript{48} Naumann J., “Media system of Poland”, Hamburg: Hans Bredow Institute, 2005.

\textsuperscript{49} Soros Foundation (Open Society Institute Foundation), \textit{Television across Europe}. 

reached 92% on Polsat and 56% on TVN, with the addition of 28% from South America and 11% from Europe. One of the reasons for this openness to foreign products and formats was the extension of the broadcasting time, that within a few years came to transmit for twenty-two hours per day on two public channels; therefore, “the lack of industrial infrastructure, inappropriate models for production […] and the high launch and start-up costs of the new channels” made inevitable reliance on a wide import.

Table 2 - Audience share of main Polish television channels (2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TVP1</th>
<th>TVP2</th>
<th>Polsat</th>
<th>TVN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24,8%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>17,1%</td>
<td>15,8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Naumann, “Media systems of Poland”.

Klimkiewicz described the evolution of the Polish public sphere on the basis of two contradictory trends: the particularization and the universalization. On one hand, the fragmentation of the party system in the years immediately following the fall of the regime has been accompanied by a growth of press and audiovisual media which have diversified and enlivened the media landscape; on the other hand, the adherence to the principles of free market has made it necessary to reach a wider audience causing a progressive approval in media content.

5. CONCLUSIONS: A NATIONAL WAY TO POST-COMMUNISM

The analysis of the transformation of media systems in two countries which escaped from a similar regime leads us to track some key elements of the detachment from the old model. First of all, the proliferation of mass media hardly correspond to pluralism, that is a qualitative representation and consolidation of a mature public opinion, as already foreseen by Dušan Reljić; in fact, in Albania and Poland, as in other Eastern European countries, the development of mass media did not mean a real circulation of them. Then, both media systems tended to organize around two big private companies in opposition to public sector; this aspect reveals the tendency to shift from the fragmentation to a grounded “dual system”. Lastly, with the end of the regime, there was a wide import of foreign products and formats, in particular American series and fictions.

However, Albanian and Polish media systems differ in some features: a distinction regards the weight of public sector; while in Albania the sudden outburst of private broadcasters relegated public sector to a secondary role, in Poland the primacy of public service broadcasting has never undermined, even due to a legislation reflecting “the uniform character of Polish society” and common sense of national identity. As a

50 Szostak, “Poland’s return to Europe”.
51 Ibid., 84.
52 Klimkiewicz B., “Ethnic minorities and media in Poland: democracy without advocacy?”, CCUPIDS (Canadian Consortium of University Programs in International Development Studies), 2005.
54 Szostak, “Poland’s return to Europe”.
55 Stępka P., “Public service broadcasting in Poland: between politics and market”, in Reinventing pub-
result, Albanian media sector fragmented in regional and subnational networks, delaying the construction of a system based on shared values; in Poland, the centrality of public service smothered variety of commercial broadcasters. However, these features didn’t hinder the emergence of two large blocks: a national public service and a commercial sector with a few heavy subjects leading and occupying the market.

Comparison between these two countries shows how, albeit in a similar socio-cultural context, media transition followed different paths; media system is a valuable field to rough out a national way to post-communism in a very complex and changeable area of Europe.

SUMMARY

With the fall of Berlin Wall and the end of communist regimes in 1989, some Eastern European countries began the transition towards democracy. Thus, media system gradually detached from the statist model typical of totalitarian regimes to approach liberalization and commercialization, albeit in different ways in each country. This article tries to catch the changes occurred in media systems of two countries such as Albania and Poland, in order to highlight the variety of media transformation in that area. The aim of the work is to trace the origins of the process that untied the media (especially television) from state monopoly; while in Albania deregulation of the sector favoured proliferation of private television channels, often broadcasting in small areas, in Poland pluralism and liberalization clashed with the traditional primacy of public service.

RIASSUNTO

Con la caduta del muro di Berlino e la fine dei regimi comunisti nel 1989, alcuni Paesi dell’Europa dell’Est cominciarono la transizione verso la democrazia. Pertanto, il loro sistema dei media si è gradualmente emancipato dal modello statalistico tipico dei regimi totalitari, affrontando forme di liberalizzazione e commercializzazione, sia pure secondo modalità differenti per ogni Paese. Questo saggio descrive i cambiamenti nei sistemi mediali di due Paesi come l’Albania e la Polonia, per mettere in evidenza la varietà di trasformazioni mediali avvenute in quell’area. Scopo del lavoro è tracciare le origini del processo che ha slegato i media, e la televisione in particolare, dal monopolio statale. Se in Albania la deregolamentazione ha favorito una proliferazione di canali televisivi privati, che trasmettono spesso solo su aree limitate, in Polonia il pluralismo e la liberalizzazione si sono dovuti scontrare con la tradizionale supremazia della televisione di servizio pubblico.